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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the possibilities that Internet technology presents for the creation of an online, dynamic learning environment for language learners. Rather than simply use the Internet to deliver course content, the paper demonstrates the learning process can benefit from the interactive, self-directed, and self-authoring potential of the technology. The first section addresses problems with the use of the preset course delivery approach for language learning, which requires a process-based orientation. The second section discusses the importance of open negotiation between student and teacher to establish learning goals and application needs. The third section presents a process-based framework of instruction for language learning and academic achievement that includes various levels of communication, self-directed and self-selected language practice, and language production through speech practice and written form. The fourth section summarizes several suggested characteristics of dynamic and autonomous language learning for distance learners, including self-direction, interaction, instructor intervention, dialogue, and authentic language production. (Contains 17 references.) (MES)

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Using the Internet as an Instructional Tool: ESL Distance Learning

By: Ruth Reynard

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Using the Internet as an Instructional Tool: ESL Distance Learning

By: Ruth Reynard
Track 1 - Effective Technology Based Learning Environments
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Abstract

This presentation will highlight the possibilities that Internet technology presents for the creation of an online, dynamic learning environment for language learners. Rather than simply use the Internet to deliver course content, the presenter will demonstrate the learning process can benefit from the interactive, self-directed and self-authoring potential of the technology.

Proceeding

Introduction

The Internet, because of its flexibility and accessibility, is fast becoming the technology of choice for distance education in North America. It is the most cost-effective mode of distance delivery on this continent and, I would also suggest, the Internet has the potential of being the most effective way to teach and learn at a distance in a computer-supported environment. In an editorial in the *American Journal of Distance Education* (Vol.14 No.1, 2000; M.G. Moore), statistics reported by the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 1999, suggested that nearly 80% of public (US) post-secondary four-year educational institutions and more than 60% of public two-year educational institutions offered distance education courses in 1998-1999. According to the author, the most frequently used delivery technologies were asynchronous Internet instruction (58%), two-way interactive video (54%), and

one-way prerecorded video (47%). Institutions, however, reported greater interest in Internet technologies and two-way interactive video over other technologies in the future. The rapid movement towards the Internet as a delivery technology is influencing how distance education courses are being structured, how instructors are teaching, and how students are learning.

Growing numbers of distance education courses are designed by professors to suit licensed software delivery platforms, which are based on principles of instructional design. According to Duffy and Jonassen (1992), "Instructional design, and indeed instruction in general in the United States, emerged from an objectivist tradition" (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992, p. 2). In this objectivist approach, it is important to identify what the learner needs to know, how the learner learns, and to engage the learner in the learning process in order to master the knowledge pre-identified as correct (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). The objectivist approach spans behaviorist theory to cognitive psychology. Throughout this theoretical span, the existence and acquisition of information are independent of each other (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). Constructivism, on the other hand, promotes the notion that the individual's experience of the real world is crucial to understanding. Experience, then, must be examined in the pursuit of understanding and as such, constructivist approaches tend towards authentic experiential learning. Instructional plans become plans for action towards process. Outcomes are not preset but evolve through the learning process (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992).

While course delivery platforms provide an efficient means to organize and deliver content and communicate with students, without clear understanding of pedagogy, courses can remain static and two-dimensional. Content is compartmentalized and sequenced according to course structure and time lines rather than learning outcomes (Mioduser, Nachmias, & Lahav, 2000). The main reason for this lack of implementation of effective pedagogical approaches is that most distance learning sites maximize the capability of the Internet to distribute content and network groups of learners with little attention to the potential of Internet technology to function as an instructional "scaffold" for the actual learning experience. Scaffolding in this context refers to the possibility of hypertext (active embedded text links) technology to support learning by providing the learner with the ability to change course direction and outcome and to embed and integrate information and additional self-directed resources through search and study tools.

Language Learning

This preset course delivery approach is particularly problematic for language learning. Pre-set course delivery platforms do not usually support dynamic processes of teaching and learning that are required to teach language effectively. Delivery platforms (as the descriptor suggests) are designed to deliver courses efficiently and cost effectively with little bandwidth fluctuations. Language, however, is a dynamic process and involves active student participation in order to provide individual learners the opportunity to meet learning goals and to use language authentically (Ellis, 1996; Krashen, 1982;

Skehan, 1989; Stern, 1983). While language provides the form for content, language itself is not a content area and should, therefore, not become broken down into elements and isolated language sequences in order to suit course structures and assessment levels (Cummins, 2000). Alternatively, content-based language courses often provide only de-contextualized language supports that have diminished relevance for learners. Although content can be understood, processed and applied through language, language systems can only be effectively acquired and applied by learners within meaningful contexts of learning (Krashen, 1985).

Therefore, rather than organizing or structuring language elements, language learning requires a process-based orientation (Breen, 2000). The individual learner should be able to negotiate a learning path that reflects personal learning goals and needs. Barnett (1993) cautions that often technology can simply be used to replicate classroom procedures and strategies and to foster teacher control rather than encourage learner control. For example, contextualized reading samples can be accessed in an electronic format (e-books) and read simultaneously with online dictionaries (e.g. www.babylon.com), thesauruses, and grammar helps (either customized to suit the text by the teacher or generic online searchable grammar supports). In such an environment, technology scaffolds the learning rather than simply delivering objects or files. Language meaning and use can be understood and practiced by the learner.

Negotiation as central

The role of the instructor also becomes important in a learner-centered and learner-directed environment (Yang, 1998; Thanasoulas, 2000). Instructors become co-learners, co-authors and co-designers with the students and intervene at significant stages, when needed to help the students continue on their learning path (Little, 1995; Cotterall, 2000). This kind of relationship depends on dialogue; open negotiation between student and teacher to establish learning goals and application needs (Breen, 2000; Cummins 2001).

When a course design includes learning scaffolds and learner-directed options, language learning becomes interactive and multidimensional (student with content, student with student, student with teacher and student with self and student with the WWW). This level of interactivity also intensifies the desire for students to produce and publish work in order to create an individualized presence in the environment (Kramsch, A'Ness, & Lam, 2000). Learning communities also provide a useful context to distance learners in order to establish connectivity, peer tutoring, and group work. Once connectivity has been established, communication becomes more direct and consistent. In addition, new technology can progress language learning beyond automated responses to a representation of individual identity (Meskill & Mossop, 1997). This means that the student assumes a "presence" in the environment (e.g. individual web page with links to authentic work but the student or an online portfolio – a *showcase* for the student). Any course of study has intended outcomes for learners. These outcomes are generic or global, not individualized. Without individualized learning outcomes, based on individual needs negotiated through dialogue and

interaction, students struggle with relevance and often drop out. In other words, if students cannot recognize their *presence* as having significance in the learning environment, they will feel overlooked and ignored.

Learner-directed

Cummins (2001) advances a framework of instruction for language learning and academic achievement that has three main aspects: (a) Focus on Meaning–making input comprehensible [both for mother tongue speakers and second language speakers] and developing critical literacy; (b) Focus on Language–awareness of language forms and uses and the critical analysis of language forms and uses; (c) Focus on Use–using language to generate new knowledge, create literature and art and acting on social realities.

Within his framework, Cummins (2001) identifies five phases of learning that he regards as necessary to move education beyond merely the transmission of information to knowledge generation or transformative pedagogy:

- Experiential Phase–where the prior knowledge of the student is accessed and is essential given that "Our prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information";
- Literal Phase–where basic content questions can be asked and answered from a superficial readings of texts;
- Personal Phase–where students are encouraged to relate the basic information to their own experiences and feelings;
- Critical Phase–where students engage in more abstract processes of critically analyzing the issues or problems raised in the text;
- Creative Phase–where students translate the results of the previous phases into concrete action (pp.258-259).

I also suggest the inclusion of an additional "Practice Phase" as long as the practice is self-directed and self-selected, rather than rote or teacher-led. This phase would include processes of interaction with and specific uses of the language demonstrated in the lessons. The last phase of creative production, or construction should include the actual assignment production and the construction of various learner-specific contexts for work production. Therefore, I propose a conceptual framework to encase the Cummins' framework of phases within a flexible framework of process–the process of open and equal communication and negotiation between learner and teacher. A process-based instructional framework can include:

- Various levels of communication (with peers, with teachers, with relevant sources)
- Self-directed and self-selected language practice (within authentic and "real" contexts of use)

- Language production (through speech practice – chat, telephone, audio files, and through written form, both conversational/informal, and formal – forums, discussion posts, web pages)

These are examples of technology used as scaffolding instruction; however, it is important to note that without open dialogue between teacher and student, the learning will not progress and results will not happen.

A 1997 study by Meskill and Mossop on the use of technologies with ESL learners reported that "The computer is now more widely used as a tool through and around which socio-collaborative language learning can take place" (p. 22). In addition, Meskill and Mossop found that technology had moved the theory and practice of language learning away from a ". . . static set of automated processes towards one that accounts for the multiple, complex aspects of language as a central feature of human identity" (p. 22).

Another recent study (Kramsch, A'Ness & Lam, 2000) suggests that use of an electronic medium, such as the computer, to teach language has developed a greater need and expectation of authenticity and authoring on the part of the learner. The study goes on to emphasize that interest in authenticity and authorship is evolving into a desire, on the part of learners, to operate as agents in their own learning and to identify and present a sense of individual self clearly (Kramsch et al, 2000). The study also makes a clear observation that the application of computers and multimedia environments is actually transforming the very representation of self through language (Kramsch et al, 2000).

Summary

Using the Internet as an instructional tool to support and construct instruction as well as deliver it, means that the potential of the technology itself must be utilized. Both the design of instruction and the learning environment itself must provide various levels of communication, interaction, and, in the case of language learning, practice and production, as possible. The following are a several suggested characteristics of dynamic and autonomous language learning for distance learners.

Self-direction

A key aspect of distance learning is self-direction both in navigation and resources selection – this is the same for the language learner at a distance. Rote learning and preset practice will frustrate the learner who is eager to demonstrate their learning and use the language. Distance learners also need to know that their self-direction will impact the outcome of the course by constructing their own learning path that is relevant and authentic to their reality. This is particularly the case for language learners in the use of real language.

Interaction

Hypertext technology and multimedia resources help to make the learning environment interactive for the learner. This is important to keep the learner engaged in the process. Without interaction, learners remain static and disinterested.

Instructor intervention

Highly self-directed instructional environments rely on instructor intervention even more than many conventional classroom contexts. The difference is that instructor intervention in a distance learning environment should be relevant to learner needs and specific to instructional details. This means that students should be free to initiate instructor intervention and expect almost immediate response. In a distance language environment, the feedback should use as many different communication technologies as possible so that language can be reinforced and practiced in written and spoken form.

Dialogue

Ongoing dialogue between teacher and student in order to negotiate learning needs, construct and demonstrate learning, and apply new learning in the real world is crucial to the learning process. Without dialogue, students will not sense their presence or their value to the environment. De-valued learners result in diminished results.

Authentic language production

Authentic and individual application of the language learned in a new way (i.e., language use beyond the preset parameters and scope of the preset content of the site) is vital to the language learner. The self-authoring potential of the Internet is highly effective in this regard. Students should be encouraged to publish work to others, create learning objects and dialogue openly with peers about the learning taking place. This will encourage language use at its most authentic and heighten the confidence of the learner.

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